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SUBJECT: Mano River Union Conference: Consolidating Peace and Security in the Region

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY. On November 16-17, Guinea hosted the Conference for the Consolidation of Peace and Security in the Mano River Region. The event brought together delegations from Liberia and Sierra Leone with officials from various United Nations agencies, foreign governments, and diplomatic missions based in Guinea. The conference delegates debated and presented amendments to a draft "Pact on Good Neighborliness, Stability and Solidarity Between the States and the Peoples of the Mano River Union." The conference was a clear effort to re-invigorate regional cooperation, promote peace, advance mutual understanding and tolerance, and establish mechanisms to promote common interests among Guinea, Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Cote d'Ivoire.

¶2. (SBU) Guinea was greatly assisted by the United Nations Office for West Africa, UNDP, and UNHCR in funding and organizing the event. While there was little prepared content other than the pact, participants proposed a number of concrete actions and projects. More important was the mere fact of the event, bringing together representatives of government and civil society in personal encounters where they aired frustrations, openly discussed difficult border issues, and worked together across national and linguistic differences to propose common solutions. Guinea's effort represents a significant leap from its isolated history as it attempts to re-define itself from merely a haven in a war-torn area to a sub-regional actor in an international forum. End Summary.

Mano River Delegations Vary in Size and Stature

¶3. (SBU) The November 16-17 Conference for the Consolidation of Peace and Security in the Mano River Region, brought together hundreds of delegates from Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone in Conakry. Initiated by the Guinean government in coordination with the United Nations Office for West Africa, the host delegation was dominated by Guinea's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The conference invitations went out under the name of Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation Mamady Conde, who led Guinea's delegation. On November 16, the conference was opened by Minister of State for Presidential Affairs and Coordinator of Government Actions Fode Bangoura. Also present at the opening ceremony were Minister of State for Territorial Administration and Decentralization (i.e., interior) Moussa Solano and Minister of Energy Thierno Habib Diallo.

¶4. (SBU) The Guinean armed forces delegation was led by General Kandet Toure, Director of Cabinet at the Ministry of Defense. General Ibrahima Diallo, General Inspector of Guinean Armed Forces, also took part in both days of events along with representatives from Guinea's navy and air force. Although the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had been keeping a close hold on the conference, there were mid-level officials from various ministries including Security,

Cooperation, Social Affairs, and Territorial Administration and Decentralization. (Note: Until last week, key government personnel charged with regional affairs -- including Guinea's relationship with the AU, ECOWAS, and the local representative of the Mano River Union Secretariat, had been unaware of the conference.).

15. (SBU) Liberia was well represented with a high-level delegation led by Ambassador George Wallace, Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Liberian Minister of National Security, Anthony Kromah, also played an active role in the conference. Freetown, however, did not send a delegation of equal stature. Sierra Leone was represented by Ajhaji Ali Badara Kamara, the Charge d'Affaires from its embassy in Conakry. Both Liberia and Sierra Leone had government representatives from regional centers as well as officials from various ministries. There was limited participation by civil society actors from MRU countries. Most of those in attendance were invited by the United Nations rather than the member states. Cote d'Ivoire was invited to take part in the conference as an Associate Member. However, we are not aware of any Ivoirian delegates. The Ambassador of Cote d'Ivoire to Guinea was not present at the event.

Strong Presence of International Community

16. (SBU) In addition to civilian and military representatives from the Mano River states, the international community made a particularly strong showing. The financial and logistic support for the conference was shared by the United Nations Office for West Africa (UNOWA), UNDP, and UNHCR. The dais for the opening ceremony included Hans Dahlgren, the EU representative to the Mano River Countries, who spoke of his more than ten years of experience with Guinea. Ambassador Miguel Angel Fernandez de Mazarambroz, Director

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of Spain's Plan of Action for Sub-Saharan Africa, pledged a four-fold increase in funding from Spain to advance development in Guinea and other nations in West Africa. Ambassador Nasser Borita, Director for United Nations and International Organizations from the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, promised to extend election support and continued cooperation on regional peace and security. Rounding out the dais was Mbaranga Gasarabwe, UN Resident Representative, Stefano Severe, UNHCR Country Representative, and Jordan Ryan, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General for Recovery and Governance from UNMIL's Liberia delegation.

17. (SBU) Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for West Africa, opened deliberations on the

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second day of the meeting. Although he was expected to attend, Ibrahim Gambari, Under-Secretary General and Special Advisor for Africa at the United Nations, was not present. Jean-Francois Joh Epoko, Political Affairs Officer in the UN Department of Political Affairs, told Poloff he was assigned to cover the event and brief Gambari on the conference as soon as he returned to New York. Epoko said that Gambari would probably make a trip to Guinea in December to address several issues, including elections and Mano River Union integration. Members of the diplomatic corps resident in Guinea also participated as observers.

Promoting a Pact on Good Neighborliness

18. (SBU) Prior to the conference, delegates were presented a draft document entitled, "A Pact on Good Neighborliness, Stability, and Solidarity Between the States and Peoples of the Mano River Union." (Note: We scanned the draft document and sent it via email to the Department.) It was used as the basis for two days of deliberations within four working groups on the following themes:

- 1) Disarmament, demobilization and reintegration programs, fight against small arms trafficking and the consolidation of peace;

- 2) Cross-border issues, opportunities, and challenges to the free movement of people and goods;
- 3) Human rights, humanitarian issues, and the consolidation of peace and security in the sub-region;
- 4) Commitment of youth and women to the consolidation of peace and security in the Mano River Union.

Each group was charged with delving into a section of the draft pact -- to make amendments and to propose relevant joint programs.

¶9. (SBU) Chapter I of the Pact outlined several principles of peaceful coexistence. Chapter II of the draft document outlines the objective of the pact. It reads, "This pact shall serve to promote and to build confidence among the member States; to strengthen and maintain cooperation, peace, security and stability among the communities of the Mano River Union, in an atmosphere of mutuality and solidarity...these measures shall strengthen and complement the objectives of ECOWAS and of the African Union by means of concentrating on the actions taken in key areas covered under the Pact, with a view to consolidating regional peace and security". The conference organizers said the delegates' recommendations would be submitted to each country for further amendments and a final document would be adopted at the next Summit of Heads of State of the Mano River Union.

Stolen Mangoes, Rape, and Other Family Secrets

¶10. (SBU) During the working group deliberations there were many references to the member states as "good neighbors" and "family members." The small group sessions on the first day of the conference were consumed by an almost palpable need to bear witness to and try to make sense of transgressions and crimes that crippled the region. This mood was especially pronounced in the session on cross-border issues. Eschewing the agenda, Mbemba Bangoura, the governor of Faranah, spoke passionately about Sierra Leoneans and Liberians sneaking over the border to steal Guinea's rich mangos and pineapples. He alleged the fruit is stolen and sold in neighboring countries for many times more than they could be sold in Guinea. Bangoura said he was not so pained by the act of pilferage, but frustrated by a Guinean economy that is so much feebler than its war-torn neighbors. The participants addressed the thorny issue of Yenga and agreed that a buffer zone should be developed for international commerce.

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¶11. (SBU) Some women spoke matter-of-factly about being raped by gangs of combatants, many of them young teenagers known to them. The women said they were less pained by the rapes themselves than by the utter unresponsiveness of their neighbors. Saran Daraba Kaba, President of the Mano River Women Peace Network, admonished participants in the session on women and youth to "never again" turn away when neighbors are suffering. Sierra Leone and Liberia have their respective truth and reconciliation commissions to deal with the emotional and legal fallout of the wars that have ravished them, but Guinea lacks any such outlet, she said. Guineans have not been ravished by war, but they clearly wanted their neighbors to know they too suffer. By the end of the first day, participants seemed ready to work towards concrete suggestions and adhere to the agenda.

¶12. (SBU) On the second day, the working groups returned in earnest to the tasks at hand - developing concrete proposals for action. In the readouts from the working groups, there were few changes to the draft Pact on Good Neighborliness. All delegates agreed that their collective action was needed to improve the situation in the region to guarantee sustainable peace and prosperity. The afternoon was punctuated by traditional music from a local musical troupe of Guinean youth. Saran Daraba Kaba and other women from the Mano River Women Peace Network exhorted participants to their feet to enjoy the music. In the main conference room, lines of protocol were dropped as governors and ministers danced with representatives

from civil society, and ambassadors and generals moved to the traditional rhythms of the region.

Transforming the MRU from a "Den of Death and Despair"

¶13. (SBU) In his opening remarks, Liberian Foreign Minister George Wallace said, "The people of Liberia are committed to transform the Mano River Union from a den of death and despair into a space of serenity, calm, and peace. We have all paid for civil uprising and war and have said goodbye to actions that risk national unity. A responsible Liberia is re-entering the community of nations and we intend to build mutual trust with our neighbors". Wallace continued his remarks by stating that security was the foundation for development and "Liberia is willing to enforce the Pact to the letter." This sentiment was shared by other members of the Liberian delegation.

¶14. (SBU) The Ambassador spoke with Liberian Foreign Minister Wallace on the margins of the conference. The Ambassador noted that the level of Guinea's anxiety about Liberia had diminished since Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's election and, especially, since Charles Taylor's incarceration in The Hague. He said that, with Taylor in jail, Guinea no longer feared another rebel attack and appeared open to normalizing its relations with Liberia. The Ambassador recommended that Liberia appoint an ambassador to Guinea without delay to facilitate communication between Conakry and Monrovia, and to rebuild confidence between Guinea and Liberia. Foreign Minister Wallace agreed, saying that he already had a candidate in mind.

¶15. (SBU) In his closing remarks, Ahmedou Ould-Abdallah congratulated Guinea for its constant efforts in support of the region. He encouraged all MRU states to keep reaching across borders to develop collective solutions to improve the everyday lives of the population. He also said that Guinea needs to focus on developing a national dimension to the themes of the international conference it is hosting. Ould-Abdallah encouraged Guinean leaders to reach out internally to civil society, political party leaders, and other key segments of its population to promote peace and stability in Guinea. "We must reinforce the connections between the nations and we must reinforce the linkages among the people within each nation," he said. Ould-Abdallah encouraged firm follow-up to continue the forward momentum.

Comment

¶16. (SBU) The conference was the first such forum for Mano River Union representatives from governments, security forces, and civil society to have such an honest dialogue. The fact of the meeting was more important than the actual substance of the discussions. Most significant perhaps was that the regional initiative was led by Guinea, with its history of isolation. It marked Guinea's effort to emerge from the shadows of its neighbors' civil wars. Many difficult issues were put on the table, including gross human rights violations, ongoing border issues, and airing the "dirty laundry" of wars, rebel incursions, and their aftermath. The atmosphere was friendly, warm, and "good neighborly". All agreed that it marked a

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very positive step in the right direction.

¶17. (SBU) The conference organizers repeatedly encouraged the development of projects to be submitted to donors. Post plans to coordinate with U.S. Missions Liberia and Sierra Leone to determine what type of collaborative projects may be viable. We also plan to work closely with our Guinean contacts to encourage them to mobilize national resources in support of these priorities. During the conference, we reminded them that donor engagement should compliment, rather than replace, the MRU members' commitment. While the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted the conference, much of the vision (including the draft documents) was contributed by various United Nations offices.

MCDONALD